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ABSTRACT

Moliere's "Tartuffe" is an attack, not on religion, but on people who hide behind religion and exploit it. As a college professor in charge of student production searched for a director's concept for "Tartuffe," she realized that it would be unwise to attempt a museum staging of neo-classical theater with limited funding. She therefore chose a postmodern interpretation of eclectic directorial choices based on a concept "to frame or framing." From the beginning the semiotic or symbolic message presented to the audience was that space is a holy place for artists to work. The play began with Enigma's music "Mea Culpa." The images used on the floor were symbolic of the art revered during the neo-classical period. Contemporary interest in angels helped the design team settle on a early Renaissance angel from Piero della Francesca's "The Annunciation." "Tartuffe" is known for the most important table scene in theater history because of the seduction. This places a focus on furniture. During rehearsals four typical rehearsal blocks become everything. The blatant blending of the secular and religious caused a mixed reaction among the audience to the production. There was a raw quality about the production that some found disquieting. What was most exciting, however, was to see students discover theater as popular culture. (TB)

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Mary Jo Sodd

# Manipulating Images of Popular Culture upon Neo-Classical Theatre: Tartuffe at Susquehanna University

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Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania built a new theatre complex in 1992. Since, the number of majors in Theatre Arts has expanded to 21 students from 6. When the department decided to include Tartuffe in our 1993-4 season, I first wondered as a director how I could mold freshman and sophomores into an acting ensemble.

Moliere's Tartuffe is an attack, not on religion, but on people who hide behind religion and exploit it. I chose Richard Wilbur's translation of the comedy; a text which emphasizes both the verse and the splendor of language, while retaining the commedia dell'arte influences often lost in other versions. However, even the physicality in Wilbur's translation would be difficult for students to find due to their limited skills with scansion, or the orchestration of verse, and textual analysis. It was imperative to find a means or a key for the students and young audience to discover the richness of both the story and the text. The key evolved from a fusion of popular culture within the theatrical space. This paper addresses the effects of the usage of popular culture on an academic theatrical production of a Neo-Classical text such as Tartuffe.

As I searched for a director's concept for Tartuffe, I recognized that it was unwise to attempt a museum staging of neo-classical theatre with limited funding. But more importantly, I wanted my actors and students from the theatre literature and

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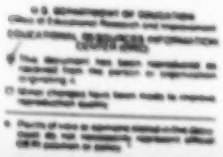



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history courses to learn to like, if not love, Moliere; my experience is that few students from the MTV crowd fall in love with museum theatre. To appeal to these students it seemed that Moliere's words would need to find a significance to their world.

While contemplating these dilemmas, I went home for lunch one day in the spring of 1993 and was stunned by CNN's live pictures of the Davidians' complex burning in Waco, Texas. After becoming desensitized by re-run after re-run of burning structures, I began to see Moliere's religious impostor take form in a way that would communicate to the MTV crowd's world. Here was theatre in contemporary culture as the media played upon the flaming spectacle of Waco, Texas; ironically, David Koresh as a charismatic religious leader was not much different from Moliere's Tartuffe. I began to ask who was more of an impostor--the character of Tartuffe or the cult leader? I began to know how to translate this to a stage in Pennsylvania.

It was my opinion that the students could easily dismiss a classical play of rich costumes set amidst antiques as irrelevant both thematically and politically to their lives. Rather than a museum staging, a production manipulating images and references from contemporary music, Khomeini, Salman Rushdie, Waco, Texas, and multiple languages might entice a younger generation to Moliere's neo-classical masterpiece.

I chose to stage Tartuffe with a postmodern interpretation or eclectic directorial choices based on a concept "to frame or framing." Research provided a definition of frame in Webster's

that would translate theatrically:

> **frame** *v.* 1. to shape, fashion, or form, usually according to a pattern; . . . 6. a set of circumstances that serve as background to an event; . . . 7. [Colloq.] to falsify evidence, testimony, etc. beforehand in order to make (an innocent) person appear guilty (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language p. 553)

This definition paralleled my ideas about Moliere's text and it spun additional ideas to assist both the actors and the scenography. More importantly, this concept seemed true to Moliere's text.

Rehearsals began with table work that involved stating my concepts to a cast and crew who were novices to directors who utilize concepts or design metaphors. I told them that during the process of staging, I planned to explore and exploit the framing of boundaries that result because of pressures from society, culture, and family relationships.

Obviously, a frame is composed of both rigid horizontal and vertical lines. Thus the concept of a frame offered me opportunities to explore not only the horizontal lines of staging, but also vertical aspects of production. The concept of framing immediately influenced the costumes and period movement of the actors. The effect of boning in a costume is a visual framing of the human body. For the women, I decided it would be effective whenever possible to use boning visible to the audience

that would accentuate the 17th century "hour-glass" figure popular for women and the Madonna crowd today. The visible boning of historical and contemporary underwear presented the image of inside out to the audience. Corsets were worn over flesh-colored leotards and the use of pastel tulle over dance wear was used for both artistic and budgetary reasons. Tulle could be manipulated into shapes by the cutting, yet the airiness and see-through quality of tulle would allow the boning to be visible and would frame the body shapes. The colors emerged from the colors I had seen in the flames and destruction of Waco, Texas. The men, with the exception of Tartuffe and the king's man, wore long natural muslin shirts similar to rehearsal shirts that were cinched or corseted at the waist over flesh tights. Tartuffe's costume was created from details found in Antoine Watteau's picture Italian Comedians (c. 1719-1720) at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

In an effort to explore the spatial opportunities, I chose **hurricane** as a metaphor to present to the designer. A hurricane is a force of nature that is invisible yet powerful and quickly changes the environment from a state of calm to chaos. This metaphor is useful for blocking in that a hurricane knows few boundaries and can break most; this will be very helpful to a postmodern interpretation. Additionally, this metaphor assists the **deus ex machina** ending and offers multiple design opportunities. I further explained that an impression I have of Moliere is that through his use of dance, music, and drama, he

creates theatrical action similar to a hurricane. Moliere did not build boundaries between the arts, but meshed the different forms into one form of performance art; I will attempt to do the same.

From the beginning the semiotic or symbolic message presented to the audience was that space is a "holy" place for artists to work; it was hoped that this would punctuate Moliere's text. In an effort to stretch this classic into a performance art piece it was decided to keep all the performing arts visible and simultaneously working. Joanne Landis, a renowned local artist, created a theatre poster during rehearsals that greeted the audience in the lobby. Inside the theatre a pianist, Josh Yohe, was visible to the audience in a side vom as he underscored the dialogue with popular and original music at appropriate moments. The other vom held a painter painting the action of the play throughout the first act and intermission. The visual artist and musician were incorporated as part of the action.

The play began with Enigma's music Mea Culpa while in the midst of Orgon's family was a birthing ritual from which the religious impostor emerged. Historically many 17th and 18th century plays began with a levee scene in which the audience saw the characters clothed. To begin Tartuffe with a levee scene set to popular music gave the audience an introduction to a commedia dell'arte troupe becoming the Orgon family through their costumes. As the family dressed, two dancers created the monster by dressing the "naked" Tartuffe, who previously was clothed only

in flesh tights, in ritual clothing. The dance fused mime with movement that stretched the movement from classical ballet to modern dance including signatures of Bob Fosse's repertoire.

After the opening dance sequence the audience was confronted by sounds of scissors and other cutting sounds. Overlapping the cutting sounds, conversations in first French, then bi-lingual conversations in English and French, and finally English conversations about Tartuffe and Orgon's family were heard by the audience. These conversations framed the beginning and end of the production and did not alter the body of Wilbur's translation. However it seemed appropriate to expand the boundaries of cultures by fusing the symbols or languages, and this production used English, French, Latin, Spanish and Italian intermittingly as the few set pieces were changed. The conversations were snatches of gossip that reiterated Tartuffe's previous dramatic action in another tongue. The sounds of slicing were chosen as symbolic of the severing of relationships or trust in the family.

The scenographer for Tartuffe was Herbert O'Dell. When decisions were made about the scenography in respect to the hurricane metaphor, I requested that no walls be used in the set. In the end, only a red tapestry was visible at the back of the set. Flexibility and the ability to clear the stage in minutes for dance were necessities. The lack of walls placed emphasis upon a raised floor that could be quickly manipulated into the living quarters of Orgon's family or extended into an environment

such as their gardens. Any side wings, screens or walls were provided by ropes with a round circular disk (later known as oreo cookies) flown in to suggest a set utilizing Sebastian Serlio's ideas of perspective scenery. It was imperative to the concept of the play that the actors' performances be totally visible to assist Moliere's themes of hypocrites and impostors in society. One example would be the audience seeing the truth of a situation through the physical reactions of Damis, who normally is played behind a screen, to a discussion in which Tartuffe cons Orgon. Whenever it aided Moliere's subtext about hypocrisy or impostors, actors became fully visible behind screens, columns, door, walls or any architecture frames.

The images used on the floor were symbolic of the art revered by the neo-classical age and the religious institutions Moliere was examining. Contemporary interest in angels helped the design team settle on a early Renaissance angel from Piero della Francesca's The Annunciation being painted down stage center. This area became the "holy" space where only Tartuffe knelt, prayed with a rosary, used holy water, etc. Above the angel were details from the Sistine Chapel's Creation of Adam by Michelangelo. The classical art details were painted by the artist Jeff Martin. In between these images, French liturgical text in Latin and features from The Tres riches heures of Jean, Duke of Berry were scribed by the stage crew. Since the entire stage floor was raised, the collage on the floor looked like an open book of French Medieval text and illuminations.

In contrast to the interior settings, was a garden environment that echoed the image of the garden of Eden or the "pure" love between Marianne and Valere. Symbolically, gardens are sanctuaries for non-sinners; when obscene discussions about Tartuffe emerged between Orgon and Marianne, a bird from above with "divine" knowledge defecated next to Orgon because of his wrongful decisions. The symbolic imagery of flowers, virginity and simplicity contrasted with the hypocrisy and religious impostor's trappings often found within the clutter and glitter of neo-classical residences.

Tartuffe is known for the most important table scene in theatre history because of the seduction. This places a focus upon furniture. During rehearsals four typical rehearsal blocks become everything: a garden bench where Marianne escapes to find Valere and a settee for Elmire. The blocks offered design flexibility and quick changes. However, a true table was needed to allow a hiding space for Orgon during the disclosure scene. Scenographically and semiotically the table looked like an altar, which helped highlight Tartuffe's actions and Moliere's subtext.

All furniture was rearranged by house servants, a lazzi-troupe of three, who changed all environments in full view of the audience. Because of these characters' visibility, every scene began to take on a play within a play characteristic. Servants, in keeping with lazzi routines, would sneak peeks at the family and later ridicule them through gesture and gossip in Spanish and Italian during set changes and the removal of props.

Since the production was post-modern in nature, the choices for props expanded beyond antiquarianism toward eclecticism that bridged different time periods. Many props such as antique scissors or fans were attached by ribbons to the costumes. Rather than just the predictable use of rosaries and prayer books, the icons of serving bread, fish and wine to Tartuffe by the servants helped elevate Cleonte's **raisonneur** scene. Baskets of flowers and garden tools, including contemporary hedge clippers, were carried on and off by the acting company. Near the end of the play, all props were removed as the company exited, and only the table remained on stage.

However, the play ended with only Tartuffe returning to the stage, standing above the table as an altar. In keeping with the "hurricane" idea and chaotic changes of environments, Tartuffe looked at the audience as multiple news reports in different voices overlapped with stories about Rasputin, Charlie Manson, Jim Jones, Jim Baker, Khomeini, and the latest occurrences in Waco, Texas. Towards the end of the reports, the two dancers emerged to strip the actor of his Tartuffe garments as he exits the stage; this was done to frame the action of the script to reflect the circularity of history (the constant re-emergence of charismatic impostors).

The blatant blending of the secular and religious caused a mixed reaction among the audience to the production. Those who wished to be only entertained were surprised, if not shocked, by the depth of religious and societal examination that Moliere

proposes within the text. These often were people who expect to see "something pretty" when they see a classical play. One note from the retired chaplain suggested that I should have cut the table scene. There is no doubt that attempts to bridge Moliere's world and culture with our own culture caused discomfort. This is probably because Moliere's words still ring true today when discussing contemporary social and religious mores. To sum it up, there was a raw quality about this production that some found disquieting; I think Moliere would have been pleased.

In the end, the total **mise en scene** provided the actors no place to hide, yet demanded performances within a defined and controlled set of boundaries that paralleled the neo-classical practices. The rehearsal process stressed traditional tablework and scansion that helped the cast understand the text, while the eclectic scenographic choices linked the past with the present and created a level of relevancy. For the actors, the ritual usage and exploration of the space helped them understand and be able to successfully perform Moliere's debates about religion and hypocrisy. Additionally, the mixed reaction to the production made the students appreciate Moliere's trials with censorship and artistry that still occur today.

What was most exciting about this post-modern experiment was to see students discover theatre as popular culture--not just to read about theatre in a history course, but to see and experience theatre. This became clear by virtue of the several students who saw the show twice and not because of an assignment. In the end,

I found the students who grew to appreciate and love Moliere, and I could not ask for more.

I believe that the postmodern idea of history as theatre that probes theatre as history is behind this production of Tartuffe. Ironically the concept of impostors is partially what theatre is about and has been debated since Aristotle's writings about **mimesis**. CNN, David Koresh and the theatrical happenings in Waco, Texas, just help us frame the question: are all of us impostors and is there any reality?

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